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The Visions of Lena Younger created by Lorraine Hansberry in *A Raisin in the Sun*

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2010 with a BA in Theatre Arts and
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Grant Project under the direction
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expanded into one semester honors
thesis. Lizandra will be presenting
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attend graduate school in fall 2011.

This is one chapter of a full Honors' Thesis entitled "*The Visions of Women Created by Three Major Female African American Playwrights of the Twentieth Century: Georgia Douglas Johnson, Lorraine Hansberry, and Suzan-Lori Parks*". This chapter addresses the vision of Lena Younger created by Lorraine Hansberry in *A Raisin in the Sun*. It analyses the vision of African American women emerging through the character of Lena Younger, during the Civil Rights Movement by employing traditional dramaturgical methodology, including facets of Literary Structural Analysis, and Stanislavskian Analysis. This study in its whole will, thus, demonstrate how the self-perceived image of African American women changed over time, in particular, during the Twentieth Century, in American History.

1. Analysis of Mama in *A Raisin in the Sun*

LENA YOUNGER

"What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore- And then run? Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over- Like a syrupy sweet? Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode?"

- Langston Hughes, *A Raisin in the Sun* (6)

Lorraine Hansberry's character of Lena Younger, known as Mama in the 1959, New York Drama Critics Circle Award--winning *A Raisin in the Sun*, embodies one of the most important and interesting visions of women among all her plays. The character of Lena Younger is a result of several images of Hansberry's female protagonists. These images were created during the 1950s to "fight" stereotypes created by both white and some African American playwrights alike, who conformed to standards accepted in the American stage before the 1950s. Prevalent stereotypes in playwriting presented African American female characters as "immoral, promiscuous, wanton, frigid, overbearing, or pathetically helpless" (Brown-Guillory, 28) limiting perception of African American women.

Lena Younger is a middle-aged black woman, who is the head of the Younger household. She is a mother of two, Walter Lee and Beneatha, as well as a grandmother of one, Travis, the son of Walter Lee and Ruth. Pamela Loos, in

her study *A Reader's Guide to Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun*, notes that Hansberry provides an image of Lena Younger as "a determined fighter" (Loos, 51). Lorraine Hansberry herself described Lena Younger in the following way:

Lena Younger, the mother, is the black matriarch incarnate, the bulwark of the negro family since slavery, the embodiment of the Negro will to transcendence. It is she, who in the mind of the black poet scrubs the floors of a nation in order to create black diplomats and university professors. It is she, while seeming to cling to traditional restraints, who drives the young on into the fire hoses. (as cited in *A Reader's Guide*, 51)

This passage offers an overview of the vision of woman arising out of the character of Lena that further analysis can support and elaborate. It also provides a guiding force and good starting point for the vision of women that has emerged through this analysis.

As laid out in the introduction of this study, the analysis of the character of Lena Younger will incorporate three components of Literary Structural Analysis, beginning with the World of the Play. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, we are presented with the Younger family, a poor, Christian family who lives in Chicago's Southside, sometime between World War II and 1959 – the early days of the Civil Rights Movement. The five Younger family members live in a two-bedroom apartment, where they share a bathroom down the hall with other families in the building, "in an over-crowded black ghetto" (Gordon, 122). The house was once filled with furniture which was selected by Lena with love and pride but now is old and worn. Among the four adults in the family only Lena, Ruth, and Walter are currently employed and financially assisting the family's needs, while the younger members of the family, Beneatha and Travis, go to school. Lena and Ruth work as housekeepers and Walter Lee earns his living by serving as a driver for wealthy people. Throughout the play, the Younger family waits for an insurance check coming from the deceased Mr. Younger's life insurance policy. Overall, we can see this is a world of poverty during the early Civil Rights Moment. The Younger family lives in the suburbs of a city where the reality of segregation is not hidden and during a period of time when people either assimilate or segregate themselves from other groups. The Younger family is a poor, but hard-working one. Already, even the world of the play shows that women work hard to help the family economically.

The next component of Structural Analysis to be addressed is Imagery. Through analysis it becomes clear that the major imagery groupings can be defined as control/dominance,

nurturance, family destruction, ambition/hopes/dreams, poverty, religion, new world, and memories/reminiscence. The table right demonstrates these major groupings with specific examples.

There are significant imagery groupings that contribute or suggest the vision of woman illustrated by the character of Lena such as *control/dominance*, *memories/reminiscence/past*, *religion/morality*, *old order*, and *poverty*. Interestingly, these three groupings of *control/dominance*, *old order*, along with *religion/morality* suggest a woman who is rooted in the past and who deeply guides her life and her family's life by the rules of Christianity, further pointing to a domineering mother. These same imagery grouping categories along with "poverty" suggest a woman who thinks and speaks in the language of her generation, which limits her perception and understanding of the new generation that has been emerging, making the relationship that she has with her children to be a controlling one. On the other hand, the imagery groupings of *ambition/hopes/future/dreams*, *determination*, along with *freedom* suggest a woman who, even though is surrounded by poverty in all its negative connotation, is a nurturing mother and is determined to raise her family out of the poverty that surrounds them. Overall, the imagery groupings suggest a woman who is strongly connected to her past and who guides her life and her family's life by the rules of Christianity. These imagery groupings also suggest Lena as a nurturing woman who works hard to maintain her family while trying to live by the rules of a "good Christian", with the hope that her family will have a better life in the future.

The Imagery with the World of the Play gives a vision of a woman who holds on to her past in an old-fashioned manner at times; however because of the poverty of Southside Chicago in which she lives, she is determined to raise her family out of it. These two components also suggest a woman who will do everything in her reach to raise her family out of their poor community.

The third component of Structural Analysis to be analyzed is Character Relationship Functions. This study will evaluate only the major relationships Lena engages in with other major characters and will not consider those with secondary characters, in particular the characters who are not members of the Younger family.

With respect to her natural children, as well as her daughter in law and her grandson, Lena Younger, generally, functions within a parent-child relationship. However this relationship operates differently with each child. Lena's relationship with Walter goes beyond the obvious function of parent-child as it also

Table 1. Imagery Groupings

Control/Dominance	Nurturance	Family Destruction	Imagery of money/ Ambition/Hopes/ Dreams	Poverty
-Sound of arguing -Sound of slaps -Demands -Shouting ("Eat your eggs")	-Lena's plant -Hot grits for Travis -Garden/labor work -Derogatory name calling -Money distribution -Food (eggs)	-Alcohol -Liquor store -Ruth's pregnancy -Life insurance -Money	-Money -Insurance Check -Travis -Liquor store business -Medical school -New house	-Old house -Old furniture -No private bathroom -"Rat trap" -One window -The kitchen -Limited education -The Younger Family
Identity	Religion	Memories/ Reminiscence/ Past	Determination	Freedom
-Beneatha's hair -Guitar lessons -Horse ride -Boyfriend from Nigeria -Boyfriend who assimilates -Mirror -Liquor store	- Beneatha's morality -Lena's morality -Lena's old-fashioned morality - Beneatha's morality of the Younger family	-Mr. Younger -Old house -Old Furniture	-Asagai -Medical School -Women's hard work	-New house -"African roots" -Nigerian costume -Assimilated boyfriend
African Heritage	Order	New Order		
-African-American -Assimilationist -African characters -Nigerian clothing -African culture -African tribes	-The kitchen -The Younger Family - Home -Old furniture -Lena's preaching of morality	-College -Medical school -Africa -Abortion -Beneatha (youngest child)		

functions as abuser-abused. For example, and most obviously, Lena physically attacks Walter once she learns that he has lost part of the insurance money. Further, when she contradicts Walter's instruction given to his son, Travis, to leave the room while Walter is selling the new house, she takes advantage of the situation. Not only does she contradict Walter's decision once again, but also threaten him psychologically by allowing Travis to remain in the presence of her decision making, thereby under-mining Walter's parental power.

On the other hand, Lena functions in a dominating-dominated relationship with Beneatha, Lena's natural daughter. Lena illustrates several degrees of dominance. First, Lena demands Beneatha to be quiet several times in the play, such as in the scene where Ruth, Beneatha, and Lena are having a conversation and

Beneatha starts calling her brother, Walter, names. Second, Lena physically attacks Beneatha as well. It can be most dramatically seen in the scene where Lena slaps Beneatha for declaring that she does not believe in God, clearly attesting to the idea that Lena is controlling Beneatha's actions and at times her ways of thinking. Finally, Lena instructs Beneatha to do things which are clearly against Beneatha's will. This can be demonstrated in the scene where Lena commands Beneatha to repeat after her that in her house there is still God and there are some ideas that will never change, as long as she is the head of the family.

Conversely, Lena's Character Relationship Function with Ruth can be perceived as nurturer-nurtured (care-giver and care-taker), as well as teacher-student. Lena manifests her preoccupation with Ruth's health every time it comes to her

attention that Ruth is not feeling well. This is obvious when Lena offers to help Ruth ironing some clothes after realizing that Ruth is not feeling well. She also helps Ruth disclose the news of her pregnancy to Walter. Additionally, she takes advantage of the fact that she is the older member in the house to teach Ruth what to feed her grandson, Travis.

Through this analysis, though Lena's major Character Relationship Functions with the other major characters function in the obvious "*Parent-Child*" manner, they can also be characterized as *nurturer-nurtured* or *care-giver care-taker*, *teacher-student*, *dominating- dominated*, and *abuser-abused*. These combine to create a vision of woman as controlling, domineering, abusive, nurturing, and caring.

As a result of this Structural Analysis, Lena's multidimensional vision arising out of the World of the Play, Imagery Groupings, and Characters Relationship Functions is apparent. This vision of past World War II woman in the Southside Chicago is one of a poor, black mother who works very hard to nurture her family – both financially and emotionally – who at times is the typical controlling black matriarch, and who is always a persistent nurturing woman. Finally, under the Character Relationship Functions, the vision expands to woman as domineering, controlling, and abusive, but also nurturing, loving, and care-giving.

The second major mode of analysis is the Stanislavskian Analysis, or actor-based approach. Through this mode of analysis, it can be hypothesized that Lena's Super Objective is "I must extract my family from the ghetto and provide for them at all cost". This is clearly demonstrated by the three categories noted in the Introduction: Lena's major lines, her major actions, and what other characters say about her character.

Lena's major lines that support the cited Super Objective are as follow:

When Lena is apologizing to her son, Walter, because she feels she has contributed to Walter's unhappiness, she says:

What you ain't never understood is that I aint'got nothing, don't own nothing, aint never really wanted nothing, don't own nothing that wasn't for you. There aint nothing as precious to me... there ain't nothing worth holding on to, money, dreams, nothing else- if it means- if it means it's going to destroy my boy. (106)

Lena responds to Mrs. Johnson's commented about what will happen to them a month after they move to Claybourne Park:

We ain't exactly moving out there to get bombed... We done thought about it all Mis' Johnson. (102)

When Lena is talking to Ruth about how important her old plant is to her, she offers:

Well, I always wanted me a garden like I used to see sometimes at the back of the houses down home. This plant is close as I ever got to having one. (53)

When trying to avoid her grandson, Travis, from being "spanked" by his mother, Ruth, Lena asks Ruth to at least let her tell him what she did with the insurance money first:

I want him to be the first one to hear...- you know that money we got in the mail this morning? ...She went out and she bought you a house. You glad about the house? It's going to be yours when you get to be a man. (90-91)

From Lena Younger's lines, a woman who seemingly wants to move her family to a white middle class neighborhood, Claybourne Park, out of the ghettos of Chicago regardless of what other people may say or think about her decision, is becoming apparent.

Next, Lena's major actions also clearly support the chosen Super Objective noted above. Lena decides to purchase a house with the insurance money without consulting with the rest of the family. Further much to the disappointment of Walter, she commands Walter not to buy the liquor store, thereby destroying Walter's dream of acquiring a liquor store. In addition, Lena physically attacks her son, Walter, after learning that he lost part of the insurance money that was supposed to pay for Beneatha's medical school and contribute to Walter's dream of acquiring a liquor store. Next, Lena demands the presence of Travis, her grandson, when Walter is about to sell their new house located in Clybourne Park, hoping that it will change Walter's decision.

From Lena's actions, we are presented additionally, with a woman who values her own over those of the other family members at any cost, even if it means going against her children's will.

Finally, the major lines that attest to what other characters say about Lena are noted below:

When Beneatha tells Ruth that Mama is not always right, she says, “I see. I also see that everybody thinks it’s all right for Mama to be a tyrant. But all the tyranny in the world will never put a God in the heavens” (52).

Ruth desperately pleads to Lena, after Lena’s confession that her problem is that she is too ambitious. However, Ruth with urgency asks Lena not to give up and says, “Lena—I’ll work... I’ll work twenty hours a day in all the kitchens in Chicago...-- but we go to MOVE! We got to get OUT OF HERE” (140).

When Mrs. Johnson goes to visit the Younger’s family, she comments to Ruth and Mama about their moving to Claybourne Park. She says, “Oh, ain’t we getting ready around here, though! Yessir! Lookathere! I’m telling you the Youngers is really getting ready to “move on up a little higher. (99)

The lines of other characters in the play such as Ruth’s desperate plea, as well as Beneatha’s outburst, support the facet of woman who is perceived by others as the head of the family, by whom issues or wishes have to pre-approved, and at times, as a tyrant. Additionally, Miss Johnson’s sarcastic remarks point to Lena as an ambitious woman.

The next component of the Stanislavskian System to be addressed is Tactics. As suggested in the introduction of the study, this section analyzes the main tactics used by Lena during the play, based on Robert Cohens, two categories of *Threat Tactics* and *Induction Tactics*.

It becomes clear that the main Threat Tactics utilized by Lena in the play are the tactics of *Taking Charge*, *Overpowering*, and *Attack*. There are the many actions and lines which suggest these three Threat Tactics. Among them are the following:

When Beneatha says “Not crazy. Brother isn’t really crazy yet- he- he’s an elaborate neurotic”, Mama yells angrily “Hush your mouth” (49), suggesting the tactic Cohen calls *Overpowering*.

When Walter confesses to Lena that he has lost the insurance money, he says:

“Yessss! All of it ... It’s all gone” and without thinking it about it, Mama starts “to beat him senselessly in the face” (129).

This moment implies the tactic used by Lena is what Cohen calls *Attack*.

Additionally, upon Mr. Lindner’s exit, Lena demands that every single member in the Younger family do what they have been instructed to, she says,

Look at all this here mess. Ruth, put Travis’ good jacket on him... Walter Lee, fix your tie and tuck your shirt in, you look like somebody’s hoodlum! Lord have mercy, where is my plant?... Travis child, don’t go empty-handed... Ruth, where did I put that box with my skillets in it? I want to be in charge of it myself... Beneatha, what’s the matter with them stockings? Pull them things up, girl. (149)

The above demonstrates the tactic that Cohen calls *Taking Charge*.

From the above tactics, *Overpowering*, *Attack*, and *Taking Charge* it is obvious that Hansberry creates an image of a woman, who is domineering, controlling, and demanding.

On the other hand, under Induction Tactics, Lena seems to be engaging in tactics of *Inspiring*, *Amusing*, and *Flattering*. Among the several lines and actions that support the three most commonly used Induction Tactics, we have the following examples:

First, when Asagai, politely apologizes for visiting Lena’s house so early in the day, Lena responds,

Well, you are quite welcome. I just hope you understand that our house don’t always look like this. Uou must come again. I would love to here all about-(not sure of the name) - country. I think it’s so sad the way our American Negroes don’t know nothing about Africa ‘cept Tarzan and all that. (63)

This line suggests that Lena employs the tactic, Cohen labels *Amusing*.

Next, Lena in one instance in the play tells her son, Walter that,

When the world gets ugly enough—a woman will do anything for her family. The part that’s already living (74);

Additionally, later on in the play, during a different interaction she has with her son, Walter, she says tries to bring Walter to his senses right before he decides to sell their new house and says:

Son—I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers—but ain't nobody in my family never let nobody pay 'em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn't fit to walk the earth. We aint never been that poor. We ain't never been that—dead inside. (143)

These two distinct interactions Lena has with Walter, suggest that the tactic used by Lena is what Cohen calls *Inspiring*.

Beyond these lines, there is moment in the play, near the end, where Lena engages in a brief moment of forgiveness, in which she tells Beneatha,

There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing. (Looking at her) Have you cried for that boy today?... Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most? When the done good and made thins easy for everybody? Well then, you ain't through learning—because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in hisself' cause the world done whipped him so! When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is. (145)

These lines imply two tactics that Cohen calls both *Amusing* and *Inspiring*.

From the Induction Tactics of *Flattering*, *Inspiring*, and *Amusing*, we can conclude that Hansberry also creates an image of woman, through the character of Lena, who is nurturing, loving and, at times, inspirational. The character of Lena suggests a woman who carries a positive attitude toward most everything in her life – even toward the more difficult situations in her life – supporting the vision of Lena as a strong and maternal figure. Along with the threat tactics of *Taking Charge*, *Overpowering*, and *Attack*, the evolving vision is one of a woman who overpowers her children and controls them to a point of physical violence, but who simultaneously serves as a care-giver and source of inspiration to her children.

The Stanislavskian analysis reinforces the vision of woman that has emerged from the World of the Play, Imagery, and Character Relationship Functions through its different categories characterized by “Lena’s Super Objective”, “Lena’s Major Lines”,

“Lena’s Major Actions”, “What other characters say about Lena’s character”, and “Tactics”. The Stanislavskian analysis affirms a vision of woman through the character of Lena who aspires to live with her family in a better environment than the slums of South Side of Chicago and because of her aspirations she is perceived by others to be too ambitious. Lena is also perceived to be demanding and, at times, controlling within the relationships to her children. However, the Stanislavskian analysis, also testifies to a vision of woman who is inspiring and nurturing.

The intrinsic analysis of this study, rooted in the Literary Structural Analysis and Stanislavskian- based analysis reveals in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* several aspects of the Vision of Woman created through the character of Lena Younger. This ultimate vision is one of woman as hardworking, determined, demanding, controlling, nurturing, loving, and sensitive black mother. Lena demonstrates to be a woman of great moral strength and who demonstrates to be more than a simple black matriarchal domineering figure.

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